

"GOD SAVE THE QUEEN"

BY

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It's always exciting when a play opens in New York to be able to say I saw it first in London or Paris. Marvelous snob appeal. It happened to me - with a two-character play which opened the 1960 Dublin International Theatre Festival, called "The Kreutzer Sonata." This was an adaptation of a Tolstoy short story with which I was unfamiliar. (I enjoyed the verbal sparring in this play immensely, which shows you how successful a playwright I'm going to be - it got roasted by most of the New York critics.)

Since seeing it in Dublin, I have read the original story, heard the Beethoven sonata which inspired Tolstoy and recently saw it for the second time off-Broadway.

I expect Alec Guinness to arrive with "Ross", a portrait of Lawrence of Arabia, in the near future on Broadway. It was the hardest ticket in London. And I've read that the Robert Bolt play, "A Man For All Seasons", revolving about Sir Thomas More, is being considered for production here. Mr. Bolt should be one of the most fulfilled modern playwrights. While I was in London, two of his creations were playing side by side at adjacent theatres. I rather think that "Fings Ain't Wot They Used To Be" will never reach our shores unless they eliminate the thick cockney accents - but it would never be the same charming revue without the accents. At least I think it wouldn't be - I missed half the lines because of inability to grasp the 'tongue.' This also happened to a lesser extent with "Playboy of the Western World" in Dublin, with Siobhan McKenna. I understood the delightful Miss McKenna, but some of the other lads and lassies escaped me. Despite a moderate 'success' with the Italian comedy, "Un Mandarino Per Teo", I avoided French and Italian theatre. After all, I might get away with ordering a meal with practiced fluency, but the French would never forgive me if I laughed at the wrong moment during a serious drama.

The theatre audience is the same in any country, with few exceptions. The main exception is -liquor! I think it shall always be disconcerting for an American to stroll about during an intermission at the Haymarket Theatre or the San Carlo Opera House in Naples and discover people ordering Scotch instead of warm orange-flavored water, or sweet vermouth instead of coke.

It's been an accepted tradition in Europe for years and nobody abuses it. I shudder to think of what would happen if the idea should come about here, as has been whispered. In Europe you rarely see anyone order more than one nip during the intermission, except for the rare American in the audience. Are tourists the same everywhere? Although most theatres have only one, or at the most, two bars, it's fun to note the decrease in the price of the same Chablis as you walk up, level by level, from the orchestra to the fifth balcony at San Carlo, since there is a bar on almost every level.

English theatre, despite its 'stalls' and 'parterres' for the various seating arrangements is not unlike New York. Well, not really. As my first curtain came down in London, I had fond thoughts of Michael Redgrave ("The Tiger and the Horse") as I gathered up gloves, program (sixpence (.07) or one shilling (.14), and coat, and was blithely preparing to leave when I was brought quickly to attention. Everyone around me was standing erect and fearless as the immortal strains of "God Save the Queen" filled the theatre. Only a quatrain's worth, but I had almost committed a Yankee faux pas. The things they don't tell you about in travel brochures.

The after-theatre dash to be up front in a queue for the bus was also somewhat invigorating. Buses don't run all night in London or anywhere in Europe, as far as I was able to determine. So the theatre crowd descends 'en masse' in Piccadilly toward several local stops and suburban stations in order not to miss the last tram home. 'Home' for me was the YWCA on Eccleston Square, mainly since I couldn't get a hotel room (the only city in Europe where, without advance reservations, you're in trouble in the

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off-season). And the "Y" had a 11 p.m. curfew, which I was forced to break almost every night in London, with the theatre as the delicious excuse. The mad dash to be up front on the queue is quite a necessity, otherwise buses pass you by continuously (in Britain, the conductor will not accept passengers if there are more than a half-dozen standees - most revolutionary!), and the "Y" matron will not believe that you came straight home from the theatre.

I've been to Stratford, Connecticut and enjoyed the novelty of the theatre there, the productions and the surroundings. But I know that one of the most treasured gifts I brought back from Europe was the inexpensive pocket-size, hard-cover edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, with my penciled inscription: "Purchased at Stratford-on-Avon in September of 1960 at the birthplace of William Shakespeare", for an English teacher in a Bronx high school. You approach the Memorial Theatre on the Avon with awe. While waiting for the curtain to go up, awe becomes delight - delight with the swans, the cathedral chimes, the sculptured court jesters, the comfortable lawn chairs, and the bustling, yet peaceful village of Stratford. And when you have left the Memorial Theatre to go back to London or on to Birmingham, the awe and the delight have been metamorphised into a montage of respect and admiration and wonder at the brilliance of this company. I saw "A Winter's Tale", not one of the Bard's greatest, but as done here, certainly a disciplined, finely etched production which I shall always remember.

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